

'The pandemic sucker punched us': how activists are tackling domestic violence in Kenya's lockdown

From putting support helplines on hand sanitisers to paying boda bike drivers to blast awareness messages, campaigners have adapted quickly.

By [Georgina Hayes](#) 31 July 2020 • 12:34pm



Women's rights groups have had to adapt quickly to the increase in gender-based violence during lockdown CREDIT: Center for Livelihood Advancement/CFLA

When Nereah was told by nurses at a hospital in Kenya that boda boda motorbike drivers were sexually harassing them, her initial response was to speak to the drivers and urge them to be respectful.

Often at hospitals and police stations in order to deal with cases of gender-based violence, Nereah Amondi Oketch, president of the NAO Foundation, a nonprofit that helps women and young people in [Kenya](#), realised that there was an opportunity to be had.

“I noticed that many have loud music playing, so I thought during Covid, when we need to get messages out and get people talking about gender-based violence, we should reach as many people as possible,” she said.

“Motorbike rides are the local transport here – every minute somebody is getting on a bike – so I thought this was a good medium to reach out.”

Nereah now pays bike drivers to tune into a local radio show that discusses gender-based violence every morning. Volume turned up, they blare out the conversations for drivers and passengers alike to hear.

The measure is just one of a number that local activists have adopted in Kenya, which has seen a [dramatic increase in reports of violence against women and girls](#) under coronavirus restrictions.

While there are not yet official statistics on the number of cases of domestic violence in the country, calls to helplines have increased ten-fold since lockdown measures were imposed in late March. Earlier this month Kenya’s president ordered an investigation into rising reports of gender-based violence as a result of the restrictions, which includes a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

“Restriction of movement has really hampered the process of rescuing survivors,” said Dorothy Aseyo of Care International Kenya, a humanitarian organisation that has provided funding and support to women’s rights organisations across the country.

“If it happens at night, because of the curfew that survivor can’t be rescued until morning unless something is renegotiated, and lots of services don’t have the capacity to do that,” she told *The Telegraph*. “They will have to wait and that means exposing the victim to violence even further, or allow the perpetrator to tamper with evidence.”

Like countless organisations across the globe, Kenya's women's aid groups have leapt to respond to the crisis – often while operating at reduced capacity with limited resources amid coronavirus restrictions.

Many of the responses have been deceptively simple. Ann Sabania, from the Centre for Livelihood Advancement, has added hotlines for domestic and sexual violence on hand sanitiser and distributing them to women in the Nairobi metropolitan area, as well as the informal settlements including Mathare, Kangemi and Kibera.

In shops the bottles cost around \$12, after prices skyrocketed due to demand – meaning that poor women and families can’t afford to sanitise.



The domestic and sexual violence helpline numbers included on the hand sanitiser bottles CREDIT: Center for Livelihood Advancement/CFLA

“I had the idea because the risk of Covid-19 is so closely correlated with an increased risk of sexual abuse and domestic violence for the domestic workers we support,” she told *The Telegraph*. “The lockdown has increased the workload for the women who wash and clean, because most of the affluent people are at home and everything needs cleaning and sanitising – so the workload has increased, but the pay has not.”

“Women are facing threats at every stage of their day: home, work and travel,” she added. “So we put the hotline number on hand sanitiser because it helps the women reduce the risk of contracting Covid-19 at the same time as offering a discreet place to keep the phone number – here in Kenya it is traditional for men to not go looking in women’s handbags.”

Wider economic pressures caused by the lockdown have made poorer women more desperate for work, Ann said, making them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation by those who are offering them work.

“We are hearing stories of women being forced to have sex with their employers in order to keep their jobs. A typical scenario is a woman is selected to go to an affluent home to

do the washing, and when she gets there she is told she must provide sex services before she can do the work and be paid – that is how vulnerable these women are.

“Covid-19 has made them easy prey for those who would exploit them because their work involved working in the confines of potential abusers,” she said.

Women are also at greater risk of assault on their journeys to work, she said, either due to a lack of public transport or money to pay for it. As a result, many women are walking up to 20km, often in the dark, and returning to homes where increased economic pressures are causing domestic violence.



This 'waiting bay' is one of the places where the domestic workers wait to be selected for work – so this is a place CFLA go to distribute hand sanitiser, soap and masks CREDIT: Centre for Livelihood Advancement/CFLA

Women have also been vulnerable to police and security services, with campaigners warning that some have used the nationwide curfew as a means to harass and assault women.

Nereah says that in a two-week period she handled around ten cases of women being assaulted or harassed by police officers, but only one ended up making a formal report due to fear.

“A woman was outside past curfew having gone to eat at another relative’s house when she was defiled, and it was allegedly by police officers,” she says. The woman didn’t want to formally report out of fear, but got in touch with Nereah through Facebook in the middle of the night, which is when helplines in Kenya receive most of their calls.

By morning, she had already woken up the police superintendent and by 6am they were at the police station to formally report the incident.

Nereah's foundation has also campaigned extensively for better resources at safehouses during the pandemic: in her county they only had one rescue centre for girls under 18, but through a partnership she was able to open another for adult women. The service runs on just £300 a month, and she took a mattress and blanket from her own home to get the space up and running.

Local media and reports from campaigners also suggest a spike in teen pregnancies during the pandemic, with Nereah’s county reporting more than 6,000 pregnancies since schools closed in March – far above the average.

This has caused particular alarm as schools in Kenya will not reopen until January 2021. Campaigners have already warned that hundreds of [girls may have been forced to undergo FGM](#) in recent months as communities take advantage of school closures and prepare their daughters for marriage.

In a study published this week, researchers at the University of Birmingham also found that school closures may have made younger children in Kenya particularly vulnerable to offences committed by “non-strangers”, such as neighbours, and during the daytime. It added that the average age of a survivor is now 12 years old, compared to a national average of 16 before the pandemic.

Campaigners are increasingly calling for the government to ensure a national Covid-19 strategy that includes comprehensive protection and prevention plans for gender-based violence, with a high priority given to ensuring access to alternative when schools are shut.

“Women are [not being represented at the decision-making table](#) discussing how resources are being allocated to tackle Covid,” Nereah said.

“The pandemic has sucker punched us: it came up to us from behind and it keeps hitting us, and you cannot get up sometimes.”